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EDITORIAL

Most good causes, as they come into popular favor, suffer from diversions, if not perversions, in the interest of other causes. Just now the good cause of the conservation of natural resources has reason to file a protest against being made the victim of the old device of promoting a weaker issue by a perverted use of the popularity of a stronger one. After a normal growth of two decades under the scientific guidance of the national Geological Survey, the doctrine of conservation has recently blossomed out into wide popular favor. This special blossoming has not been without artificial fertilizers from other than strictly scientific sources, but that need count little here or there if the blossoming be left to lead on to natural fruitage without hybridization. Now, however, come diversions and perversions. The protection of natural values against wastage is one thing, the possession of these values is quite another thing. The best conservation may not be correlated with the best ownership, all things considered. Ownership, desirable on other accounts, may be an obstacle to conservation, and ownership, otherwise undesirable, may be tributary to conservation. This is so because, in their fundamental nature, the problems of conservation and the problems of possession are distinct questions, each to be solved in its own way and on its own basis. They center in separate fields. The conservation of natural resources centers in the scientific and the technical; the right of ownership and the most desirable distribution of ownership center in the political and the sociological. The best conservation of the soil is not necessarily dependent on the most desirable partition of the land. The small farmer often impoverishes his farm, while the estate of the millionaire fattens under scientific management. To divide Alaska into 90,000,000 moieties and give each of us one, would not settle the problem of the highest utilization of the Alaskan resources. To form an absolute monopoly with 90,000,000 stockholders—call it “government” or otherwise, as you please—would still leave the problem of conservation untouched. To permit fewer individuals and more corporations to pay the price and divide the ownership,

in accordance with our present practice, however proportioned, would equally leave the problem of conservation to be worked out on its own grounds. And so, though in like manner all questions of the possession and distribution of values be marshaled under extreme individuality, extreme monopoly, or some combination of individuals and corporations lying between these extremes, all are alike political and sociological in nature and, however they may issue in practice, they leave the scientific and technical problems of conservation of natural resources to be solved on their own bases. And these solutions must be fundamentally much the same under any political or sociological system.

So obvious is all this that it can only be a careless lapse into confusion of thought, or else a wilful perversion of what is legitimate in the arts of persuasion, for an advocate of political or sociological measures to glide without a note of warning from a conservational premise which commands universal assent to a political conclusion respecting ownership or distribution of values which has no logical relation to conservation, and may even be incompatible with its highest realization. In recent months we have perhaps met such perversions or confusions of thought quite as often as legitimate arguments for true conservation. Fallacies usually reveal themselves in the end and hurt the cause in behalf of which they are urged, and these perversions must ultimately stand in the way of the wisest provisions for the distribution of natural values in behalf of which they are putatively invoked. No class of men bear a more urgent commission to keep the currents of thought clear and ethical respecting our natural resources than geologists, for, more than any others, they have, as a matter of history, been the fathers of the real conservation movement. Hence this note on the untoward set of a sinister current.

T. C. C.